

Guest Column: How to Avoid a Looming Homelessness Crisis

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Homelessness is a growing problem in virtually every state. Nowhere is it more pressing than in California, which in the past three years spent more than \$13 billion, roughly \$30,000 annually for each homeless person, to address it. Tragically, its “housing first” approach is a colossal failure. Overall, says the state auditor’s office, California’s homelessness programs are disjointed and poorly managed.

Despite little progress, policymakers keep throwing more money at the problem. Rather than adopting California’s current government-centric approach, other states should learn from its mistakes by embracing reforms that directly tackle the core issues.

Many homeless suffer from mental illness and substance abuse struggles that require creating a pathway to recovery. Unfortunately, the legal precedent of *Martin v. City of Boise* is creating a “right to live on the streets.” Policy changes such as California’s voter-approved Proposition 47 have effectively discouraged the enforcement of shoplifting items up to \$950, creating a means for the addicted or mentally ill homeless to support their habits.

Instead of enabling homelessness, states should ensure appropriate punishment for those who violate the law. However, interactions with law enforcement should be viewed as opportunities to connect homeless individuals with the help and resources they need.

One innovative approach is homeless courts that “sentence” offenders to treatment, then expunging their records once successfully completed, as proposed in the California’s Compassionate Intervention Act. At the same time, the developing “right to sleep on the street” needs to be challenged through legal channels.

To complement these efforts, states should partner with private nonprofits that have successfully helped many transition off the streets. Even President Barack Obama has acknowledged that “the private and philanthropic sectors are responsible for some of the best thinking, innovation, and evidence-based approaches to ending homelessness.”

Shelters to Shutters represents exactly what he was talking about. The Vienna, Virginia, nonprofit emphasizes job placement and housing based on the mantra that “the solution truly needs to be about both.” Another strategy initiates contact with the homeless by providing necessities, including bag storage, transportation, Internet access, and a sitting room. While offering these services, the Crossroads Welcome Center in Tennessee determines each client’s needs and tries to direct them to institutions for further care.

Given the severity of today’s crisis, the homeless need to be relocated with an urgency. San Diego’s use of large tents that serve as transitional housing for about 700 a night and cost roughly \$11.3 million shows how this can be done.

California’s infamous unaffordability problems are also a causal driver of homelessness. Policymakers nationwide should implement regulatory reforms that lessen excessive living costs to alleviate the economic pressures driving too many people into the streets.

The California Environmental Quality Act, the biggest barrier to homebuilding, increases costs, and causes extended construction delays. It, as well as similar laws elsewhere, is overdue for reform.

States should pursue zoning regulatory reform to simplify multi-layered restrictions, speed up the building-permit process, and ease restrictions on building duplexes, triplexes, and granny flats in order to expand the stock of affordable housing. Eliminating rent control would also meaningfully expand the supply of housing and reduce costs, particularly in cities where housing is the most expensive.

Sustainably addressing the homelessness crisis in California and every state is a moral imperative and an economic necessity. Current conditions are the unintended consequence of policies implemented by state and local governments. Though the situation is dire in California, the good news is states can make a meaningful difference if they reject the Golden State’s ill-advised policies. Adopting the right policies should be at the top of every state’s legislative to-do list.

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